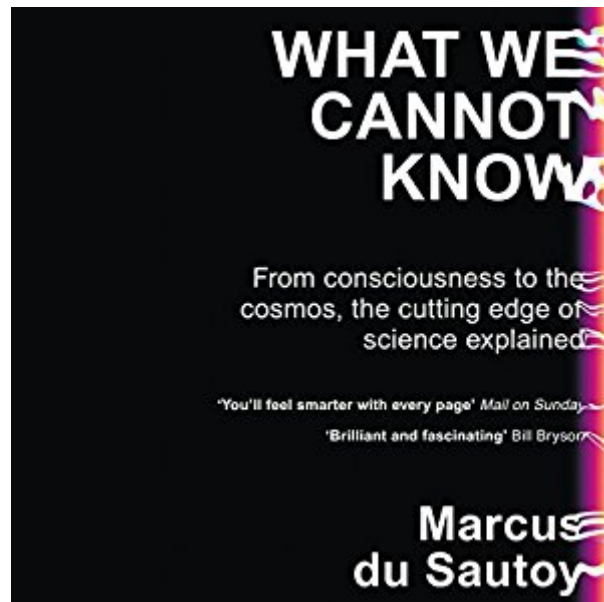




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# What We Cannot Know



## Synopsis

Britain's most famous mathematician takes us to the edge of knowledge to show us what we cannot know. Science is king. Every week headlines announce new breakthroughs in our understanding of the universe, new technologies that will transform our environment, new medical advances that will extend our lives. Science is giving us unprecedented insight into some of the big questions that have challenged humanity ever since we've been able to formulate those questions. Where did we come from? What is the ultimate destiny of the universe? What are the building blocks of the physical world? What is consciousness? What *We Cannot Know* asks us to rein in this unbridled enthusiasm for the power of science. Marcus Du Sautoy explores the limits of human knowledge, to probe whether there is anything we truly cannot know. Are there limits to what we can discover about our physical universe? Are some regions of the future beyond the predictive powers of science and mathematics? Is time before the big bang a no-go arena? Are there ideas so complex that they are beyond the conception of our finite human brains? Can brains even investigate themselves, or does the analysis enter an infinite loop from which it is impossible to rescue itself? Are there true statements that can never be proved true? Prepare to be taken to the edge of knowledge to find out what we cannot know.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Most of the text summaries, in popular science style, what we know, mainly in physics. It only then points at what we don't know yet, or what we cannot know in principle, due to limitations presented by chaos theory, Heisenberg principle of uncertainty, singularity, etc. On top of physics the book

surveys what neuroscientists and mathematicians know (and don't know) about consciousness, the consistency of mathematics (Gödel incompleteness theorem) and infinity. The book is interesting and clear. Note: in the Kindle version the formulas are displayed in a small and faint print that cannot be enlarged. Very inconvenient.

Reading this book is like sitting down with a gifted thinker and listening to his stories about exploring the brilliant success and remaining mysteries of modern physics and logic. It is entertaining and informative even if you know the issues involved, and can be appreciated even if they are new to you.

If you've missed your share of popular science books on physics, cosmology, mathematics, and neuroscience during the last two decades, then this book can be a not-so-bad starting point. The author has a very down to earth style, and manages to be engaging at the same time. His objective is clear: are there aspects of life, universe, and everything that are in principle unknowable? Are there hard limits to science? The question is simple to ask, yet finding out definitive answers is not so easy. But by setting such a clear motivation, the reader is gently led towards the state-of-the-art in scientific knowledge. Along the way, the author shares nice conversations with scientists who not only know about their respective fields, but had been pioneers who had also spent time thinking about deeper questions. Some of them, such as John Polkinghorne, might surprise you about their perspective on physics and religion. Unfortunately, no matter how engaging it generally is, the book fails to provide much depth on any of the topics it examines. In other words, if you already know about that topic then you'll be bored, and if the topic is totally new for you, then you'll be left scratching your head because of so many missing details. But if, in that case, the book manages to motivate you to dig a little deeper, your reward can be satisfying, but only after further reading. And that reading does not have to be heavily technical, for example, whereas this book talks about dark matter and dark energy only superficially, "Dark Matter and the Dinosaurs: The Astounding Interconnectedness of the Universe" by Lisa Randall will be able to give you a much better picture (while still avoiding 'scary' mathematical formulae). You might also like seeing a mathematics professor from Oxford struggling with interpretations of quantum physics, and trying to deal with the fuzzy nature of neuroscience research. The physical world is indeed messy, only approximately modeled, always waiting to surprise us, and still leaves a lot of things in the dark. But maybe, just like the author, you will get a deep satisfaction from our unstoppable appetite for scientific search and discovery. Last but not the least, even if you had your fair share of popular science books, you

might still learn a thing or two from this book regarding the edges and limits of mathematics, physics, and consciousness.

The person receiving the gift was delighted!

Excellent reading. It is like bringing mathematics into everyday life.

well written and interesting

very good

Very intriguing and thought provoking. Loved it.

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